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April 8, 2014

Mr. Tom Wheeler  
Chairman  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12<sup>th</sup> Street SW  
Washington D.C. 20544

**RE: Rural Healthcare Broadband Experiment Expression of Interest**

Dear Chairman Wheeler,

This letter provides an expression of interest from the Alabama Partnership for Telehealth (APT), Inc. to participate in the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Rural Broadband IP Experiment funding. APT is seeking 3.9 million over three years. This funding will be used to increase the level of care in rural communities across the state by connecting schools, physicians' offices, nursing homes, mental health centers, rural hospitals, and remote monitoring for chronic disease using telemedicine equipment and broadband access.

**Focus of the Project**

The focus of the proposed APT initiative is to use both high speed broadband access as well as wireless broadband to extend access to healthcare for vulnerable, difficult to reach patient populations across Alabama in rural areas where doctors are scarce and patients are not readily able to travel to metropolitan areas. Building on its current network of partners, APT will continue to integrate individual systems of care to achieve efficiencies and improve the delivery of rural health care services to Alabama's most isolated patients to achieve these overarching goals:

1. To implement a common, integrated health information platform over wireless and LAN based networks. We will utilize this access to provide a complete continuum of mental health, primary, and specialty care.
2. To improve the quality and delivery of health care services to the unserved and underserved residents across Alabama.
3. To prevent readmissions by monitoring remotely chronic disease using wireless devices and improve medical oversight and the deployment of electronic health records.
4. To educate the workforce on the new integrated health care delivery model.

5. Develop a long-term sustainability plan that will sustain the network.

## **Organizational Background**

Alabama Partnership for TeleHealth (APT) Inc., serves all of Alabama in its capacity as a non-profit health care delivery network that applies high-speed telecommunications systems, computer technology, and specialized medical cameras to examine, diagnose, treat and educate patients at a distance. APT was born out of the Georgia Partnership for Telehealth and utilizes its network infrastructure as well as its ability to purchase discounted broadband through its FCC pilot project. Through APT's network, Alabama's citizens living in rural communities gain access to the most advanced medical care without having to travel. Patients can see a variety of specialists and healthcare providers through live, real-time telemedicine encounters, store and forward technology, and receive online distance learning and education for disease management. Everyone benefits from telehealth services including the patient, their families, the community physicians, the presentation sites where the patients are located, and healthcare providers.

APT promotes and markets the open access, live video telemedicine network to physicians, hospitals and communities. APT also networks with local, state, and national agencies for program growth and continued development. APT provides training on equipment and real time IT support for network partners and supports all efforts to optimize utilization of telemedicine.

## **The Need APT Addresses**

APT is uniquely positioned to positively impact some of the most challenging issues of our healthcare system: access to care, cost effective delivery, distribution of limited providers, and access to distance learning. The need for APT's services has long been recognized:

"Serving as a physician Governor gives me a unique perspective on the health problems facing Alabama. I have seen the impact that a shortage of providers can have on a rural community. I am committed to working with the provider community, stakeholders and insurers across the state to make the telemedicine effort a success." **Robert Bentley, Governor of Alabama**

"During my eight-year tenure as Commissioner of the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries, I learned first-hand of the desperate need for improved healthcare services throughout our state—especially in the rural areas, where so many of our citizens are in poor health and suffer from chronic medical conditions. They do not have access to the medical care that they need. This (TeleHealth) initiative would profoundly impact patient care and outcomes, as well as healthcare providers, and the communities they serve." **Ron Sparks, Director, Alabama Rural Development Office**

According to the 2011 State Physicians Data Book, Alabama ranks 43rd in the United States in the population to physician ratio. The Primary Care Physician ratio in Alabama is 952:1. The National Benchmark is 631:1. The shortage of health care professionals, primary care, sub-specialty medical, and behavioral health providers is a significant problem for many Alabama residents. The problem is exacerbated for low-income individuals and families and compounded for those individuals/families that reside in rural areas. Rural Alabamians face a unique combination of factors that create disparities in health care not found in urban areas. Economic factors, cultural and social differences, educational shortcomings, and the sheer isolation of



living in remote rural areas all conspire to impede rural Alabamians in their struggle to lead a normal, healthy life. APT's services will shift the current paradigm of care and allow for improved access and health outcomes in underserved areas throughout Alabama.

## **APT'S Programs**

**Telestroke** – Alabama is leading the nation in strokes. Using the APT network, hospitals have the ability to connect to board certified neurologists who can then, via the equipment, view CT images and perform a full exam on the patient remotely. This allows the neurologist to then determine the best treatment options for the patient, often resulting in quicker recovery times. Rural hospitals can't afford to hire a neurologist to be on staff full-time. Telemedicine allows hospitals to get the coverage they need at a fraction of the cost while producing better outcomes and increasing patient care.

**Tele-Mental Health** – A lack of psychiatrists continues to put an increasing strain on Alabama's mental health system. Telemedicine is playing a major role in relieving some of the stress by bridging the gap that exists between doctors and patients. Many counties in Alabama have no psychiatrist. Telemedicine equipment allows a psychiatrist from across the state to connect with the patient from a distance, allowing the patient to get the treatment they need without having to leave their community. Many mental health centers are using telemedicine to increase access to physicians, as well to manage patient loads for overburdened physicians.

**Specialty Care** – The APT open-access network allows for both healthcare facilities and physicians to participate and have access to one another. In instances where a specialty consult is needed, telemedicine allows physicians to provide those consults while allowing the patient to remain in their communities.

## **The Services APT Provides its Partners**

- Access to Telehealth Network
- Field-Based Telehealth Liaisons
- 24/7 Technical Support
- Support for Credentialing
- Web-based Scheduling System
- Centralized PACS
- Web-based Stroke Portal

## **APT'S Partners**

APT works in collaboration with Georgia Partnership for TeleHealth ([www.gatelehealth.org](http://www.gatelehealth.org)), Georgia's highly successful nonprofit state-wide TeleHealth network, and the federally funded Southeastern TeleHealth Resource Center ([www.setrc.us](http://www.setrc.us)). APT is also partnered with Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs, the Alabama Rural Health Association, and the Alabama Department of Public Health.

In Alabama, APT's current network partners include:

### **Stroke Sites:**

Southeast Alabama Medical Center, Medical Center Barbour, Mizell Memorial, Dale Medical Center, Washington County Hospital and Nursing Home, Wiregrass Medical Center, Troy Medical Center.

**Mental Health Sites:**

Cullman Area Mental Health, Cahaba Mental Health (Selma, Perry, Wilcox locations), Cheaha Mental Health (Sylacauga, Clay, Randolph locations), Hill Crest Behavioral Health, Eastside Mental Health (Birmingham, Oneonta, Pell City locations), Mental Health Center of North Central Alabama, Mental Health Center of Madison County, NCMH Children's Albany Clinic.

**Corrections Sites:**

Ventress, Hamilton, Tutwiler, Staton, Holman, Limestone, St. Claire, Donaldson, Fountain.

**Specialist Sites:**

Dr. Daniel Mejer (Montgomery), Southeastern Cardiology Associates (Montgomery), Alabama Clinics (Dothan), Primed Urgent Care (Ozark), Childersburg Primary Care Clinic.

**Closing**

Please accept this letter as our expression of interest in the Rural Broadband IP Experiment. APT and its partner organizations stand ready to develop a more detailed proposal and provide a business plan that demonstrates the path to sustainability. Should APT be invited to do so by the FCC, APT will promptly provide additional details, answer questions, and/or develop a full proposal.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Lloyd Sirmons", with a stylized, flowing script.

Lloyd Sirmons, Executive Director  
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